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The Global Politics of Arms Sales. By Andrew J. Pierre,  
Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981, 355 pp.

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In recent years arms sales have assumed an increasingly important role in international politics. Sales burgeoned during the 1970s, stimulated in part by the new-found wealth of the oil-exporting states. Arms exports have also expanded qualitatively, with advanced combat aircraft and other sophisticated equipment now constituting much of the trade. Arms sales have become a major part of the competition between East and West, the dialogue between North and South, and the emergence of regional powers from the ranks of the less developed countries. Andrew Pierre's Global Politics of Arms Sales is the most comprehensive treatment to date of this complex topic. It is a carefully constructed and remarkably informative guide to the significance, problems, and prospects of the world arms trade.

Pierre's book rests firmly on two main ideas stated at its outset. One is that arms sales are intrinsically neither good nor bad. Rather, their effects depend on circumstances and on the policies they are used to support. They may promote stability in some instances but undermine it in others, and anyway the "stability" it affects may or may not be consistent with US interests. Recognizing this, Pierre appropriately eschews sweeping normative judgments. His analysis is sober, balanced, and free of the polemical tone that has infected much other writing on the subject.

Pierre's other basic postulate is that arms sales are inseparable from politics and foreign policy, and can be understood only by placing them in a political, as well as a military and economic, context. As its title suggests, his book is as much about global politics as about arms sales

themselves. He covers much ground--almost too much, in that he has to consider a very large number of issues that have other important aspects besides their connection with the arms trade. But Pierre's broad brush is necessary to portray fully the significance and implications of his topic.

The first of the book's four sections assesses the rationales--gaining influence, enhancing security, and reaping economic benefits--that are most often used to justify arms exports. It also addresses the relationship between arms export policy and other foreign policy interests that have sometimes impinged on it, such as human rights and nuclear nonproliferation. As Pierre's discussion makes clear, policy dilemmas abound. Moreover, there is no simple rule as to how arms sales may be tailored to attain a given objective, such as leverage over arms purchases. What gives a supplier more influence--providing arms while threatening to interrupt supplies, or withholding arms while dangling the possibility of providing them in the future? There is no universally valid answer to such questions, and Pierre wisely attempts none.

The second section discusses the principal supplier states. The chapters on Western Europe are the strongest; Pierre describes in detail the many domestic and foreign pressures that have shaped the arms export policies of each Western ally. The chapter on the USSR is less satisfying, partly because it unduly assumes that Soviet leaders will interpret Pierre's evidence the same way he does. Pierre describes the numerous cases in which Moscow has failed to convert arms sales into lasting influence (e.g., Indonesia, Egypt, Somalia) as a "lesson" that the Soviets "have not yet fully assimilated." (p. 82, emphasis added) But does Moscow continue to expand its arms exports because it has not had time to learn this "lesson," or because it has

concluded that, despite the setbacks, its successes make the effort worthwhile? The history of Soviet arms sales is now long enough that the latter conclusion seems more plausible. Pierre also understates the economic pressure on the USSR to export arms. His assertion (on p. 80) that this pressure is less than in the West is supported by several valid arguments (e.g., the relatively small effect of exports on the Soviets' unit production costs) but the hard currency earnings alone provide sufficient economic incentive for Moscow to promote sales of its weapons.

The third section is a region-by-region discussion of recipients. The Middle East receives the most attention, as befits its large role in the arms trade. The key question is how the purchase of arms affects regional stability and security--both in Pierre's own judgment and in the view of the governments doing the purchasing. His discussion shows why this question has no simple answer. Military vulnerability can undermine stability, but so can excessive military strength. The United States has confronted this dilemma in determining what level of arms exports might help induce Israel to make the concessions necessary for a settlement with its Arab neighbors. A complaint by Henry Kissinger from the 1970s (cited by Pierre on p. 160) summarizes the problem: "When I ask Prime Minister Rabin to make concessions, he says he can't because Israel is weak. So I give him more arms, and then he says he doesn't need to make concessions because Israel is strong."

The book's final section reviews past efforts to restrain arms sales and considers the prospects for future restraints. Pierre argues that multilateral management is necessary for any meaningful curtailment of the arms trade. His recommendation is informal negotiation among suppliers--initially Western suppliers only--leading gradually to quantitative,

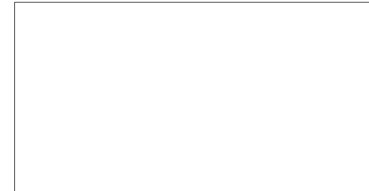
qualitative, and regional limitations on arms sales. "Management" of the arms trade does not necessarily mean reduction of it, at least not at first.

Pierre suggests market-sharing as a means to moderate the competition for customers while assuring West Europeans that restraint would not cut them out of the market entirely. The USSR and the recipient countries would be brought into the process only after Western arms exports had developed workable procedures among themselves for regulating the arms trade.

Pierre recommends this approach because he recognizes two major problems that have precluded effective restraints in the past: the suspicions of many recipient countries, which tend to resent supplier-imposed limitations as a form of paternalism and neocolonialism; and the role of arms sales in East-West competition, as demonstrated by the breakdown of the US-Soviet conventional arms transfer talks in 1978. It is debatable, however, whether Pierre's course of action would really overcome these problems. Recipient opposition to restraints is a reason for suppliers to oppose them as well, lest they appear paternalistic and diminish their standing in the less developed world. And just as unrestrained West European arms sales have been a problem in persuading the USSR to agree to bilateral US-Soviet restraint, so are the Europeans reluctant to restrict their sales without first being assured of Soviet cooperation.

Pierre is no Pollyanna, however, and he does take note of most of the roadblocks to restraint. In any event, some excessive optimism regarding the prospects for multilateral management does not diminish the book's merit as a survey of global arms sales. Moreover, it is an excellent model of the kind of analysis that this subject demands, by specialists both inside and outside government, in that it explains the arms trade in terms of a large number of related

political, economic, and security issues. To inform the policy-maker how many arms of each type are being sold where is of little help unless he also learns why they are being sold, and what consequences the sales may have for his other interests overseas.



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